An approach for the Re-Prioritisation of the Public Administration Reform agenda in response to COVID-19

This tool for the Re-Prioritisation of Public Administration Reform (PAR) Strategies and Action Plans was elaborated as part of the SIGMA response to country questions and requests for helping in adjusting their PAR agendas as a response to the new reality shaped by the COVID-19 pandemic. The draft tool was discussed with representatives of the ENP East region during a Webinar on 2 July 2020 and later updated as per received feedback and suggestions from the countries.

Why is this tool important now?

The pandemic has introduced rapid changes to many aspects of the daily life of each human being, businesses and public administrations. Ensuring safety of societies and trying to balance it with maintaining economies afloat and planning for their recovery had taken most of the attention of decision makers.

While it seems that the importance of the PAR has diminished, it has actually increased even more. This is because only strong governance systems, procedures and professional civil servants can ensure adequate responses to the challenges posed by new challenges. This has now come even more prominently with the state being asked for more active involvement in many areas of public life.

At the same time, the resources (time, people, finances) available for the implementation of the PAR has in many cases been reshuffled towards more short-term and pressing needs of countries. This has resulted in subsequent slowing down of the implementation of certain PAR-related actions. It can be expected that in the foreseeable future the resource scarcity will be further increasing. Also, the crisis situation has brought forward the need for improvements in the functioning of public administrations that previously had been seen as more long-term issues or not identified at all. The answer to these various situations, as it is the case with other crisis responses, is the need for re-thinking previously set plans and adjusting them towards the new circumstances. As in other policy areas, the PAR strategic framework also needs to be reviewed, especially due to fact that this is not a short-term crisis and all public administrations need to adapt to "the new normal" quite fast as it will take some time until the situation settles.

What is this tool?

It should be noted that this tool is not meant to substitute the existing systems and frameworks and methodologies of strategic government planning. Its main aim is to supplement the existing policy analysis toolbox available to countries to help them systematically review the PAR-related objectives and actions, in the light of the COVID-19 crisis, and its impacts and consequences on the implementation of reforms in public administration.

This tool is a mix of two analytical methods widely used in policy analysis–multi-criteria analysis and Delphi method. If interested, you can read more about them in the specialised literature. However, the bottom line is that the first one allows you to re-group objectives and actions in a priority list based on results of a uniform assessment against a number of criteria, while the second envisages the involvement of a wide spectrum of stakeholders in the assessment process to ensure that all PAR experts have a say and gain results from the process (i.e. prioritised list of objectives/actions) resemble collective opinion on what is comparatively more important and what is less important.

Who can benefit from this tool?

This tool was prepared by the SIGMA team to assist countries who have identified the need to re-think their current PAR Strategic Frameworks (strategies and/or action plans) in the light of the COVID-19 crisis.

−   It is suggested that **countries which are in the process of the elaboration of new PAR strategies and actions plans** first use the prioritisation tool that is described in the SIGMA Strategy Toolkit[1]. Only after that explicit prioritisation approach has been applied, it is recommended to use this tool to double-check whether the identified priorities are also relevant for the times of the current crisis and are focused enough.

−   For **countries that are in the review process or are planning to review and update their relevant PAR strategies and/or action plans**, this tool would provide a useful instrument to ensure focusing only on real priorities and not on those which would be obvious for business as usual. It is especially important, because the crisis time has most probably already led (or might lead in the near future) to the re-prioritisation of financial and other types of resources. Besides, the crisis might have brought to front some problems, not previously identified.

When should the tool be used?

The tool can be used starting from the moment of the idea to review the PAR strategy or its action plan has surfaced, or once the first draft of the new PAR strategy or action plan has been elaborated, using existing methodologies and guidance, including those provided in the SIGMA Strategy Toolkit. The tool is designed to be primarily used with an already defined set of objectives and actions.

However, in addition to assessing the already defined objectives and actions, new ones can be proposed through the re-prioritisation process. The newly proposed actions might appear based on the thinking process about the criteria used. It is suggested that these new objectives/actions are highlighted and that the institution/unit responsible for the PAR co-ordination would decide upon their inclusion/exclusion of the PAR strategy and/or action plan based on the full overview of the final draft that would be presented to the political level decision makers.

How should the tool be used?

SIGMA proposes that the tool be used in the following three steps:

I.   During **Step 1** (which normally should not take more than a week), all the preparatory work is carried out by the body/unit responsible for the PAR co-ordination. This includes:

−   Inserting a full list of all PAR related objectives/measures/actions into the suggested re-prioritisation table (see Annex 1) and making sure that nothing is being lost in the process. Note that completed measures or achieved objectives should not be included.

−   It is important to note that each administration:

•   Can adjust the set criteria for their country specific situation and their own preferences and priorities, e.g. removing or adding additional ones. It is important that the re-prioritisation takes into account the national context and serves the purpose of the process.

•   Can decide to add different weights to each criterion to ensure that the results of the re-prioritisation resemble what is important in the context of each country.

•   Can decide to use, instead of the dichotomous answers ("Yes"/"No"), the Likert Scale (i.e. values between 1 to 5) to better differentiate the level of priority of each objectives/measure/action. In case countries would opt for using this approach, we suggest the following grading:

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[1]   See here: http://sigmaweb.org/publications/strategy-toolkit.htm.

- o   1 – Not a priority

- o   2 – Minimal priority under the current circumstances

- o   3 – Something necessary for overall reform, but can be implemented later

- o   4 – Very relevant and important priority for reform

- o   5 – Top priority for reform.

- • Can decide to ask respondents of the re-prioritisation to provide justification/explanation to each "Yes" (or 4 and 5 according to the Likert scale) answer that they provide. It would ensure that all responses are more deliberate, and evidence-based. At the same time, it should be noted that this approach would require extra time.

- – Elaborating of a short explanation of the approach and process, so that all of the recipients understand how it is structured, why and how it is carried out. It is important to ensure that all involved parties have the same level of understanding and approach the set criteria uniformly.

- – Developing a list of all relevant stakeholders to be involved in the process. It is important to involve not only institutions traditionally associated with the PAR process, but also NGOs active in the field to ensure that there is a balanced view both within and outside the public administration. In case it is deemed useful, external actors (e.g. donor organisations and international experts familiar with the situation in the country) can also be asked to participate. The more the different participants are, the better for the outcome of the process.

- – Making sure that references to all additional and useful documents (e.g. Government programme, latest Annual Monitoring Report for PAR Strategy/Action Plan) are stated, including links to websites where the documents can be found.

- – Sending out the whole package of materials and ensuring proper communication with all identified stakeholders, explaining what is expected from them and how they should approach the assessment of each criteria. This should be done in addition to written instructions, because sometimes written communication might be misunderstood. Any questions should be clarified at this stage.

II. During **Step 2** (which normally should not take more than two weeks), there are a number of things that need to be accomplished to arrive at a re-prioritised list of objectives/measures/actions:

- – All stakeholders should take their time and fill in the re-prioritisation tables and evaluate all objectives/measures/actions against each of the set criteria. Once done, they send their answers back to the PAR co-ordination body/unit. In the case where the administration is sufficiently technically advanced, the re-prioritisation tool can be set up using some on-line solutions (e.g. Google documents, SurveyMonkey, Doodle) in order to save time for sending tables back and forth.

- – When all the stakeholders have submitted their responses, the PAR co-ordination body/unit should sum up the responses and re-group objectives/measures/actions based on the number of positive ("Yes" / or 4 and 5 according to the Likert scale) answers received (e.g. from the highest score down to the lowest ones). In case the administration has decided different weights for each criterion, that should be taken into account during the summing up of the results. It is also possible to add a second tier of weights, for example, adding more priority for COVID-19 related criteria to make sure that the actions selected as priority ones would allow to prepare the public administration for a better response during an eventual next cycle of the pandemic.

- – Once the results have been counted and the objectives/measures/actions re-grouped, the PAR co-ordination body/unit should present the outcome to the political level decision-makers (e.g. the minister responsible for the PAR or any political level decision making forum) to see whether all politically important issues have been taken into account and are properly addressed.

III. During **Step 3,** the PAR co-ordination body/unit should prepare a full-fledged draft document (i.e. either a new PAR Action Plan, or amendments to the existing one) based on the national requirements for planning documents. It should send it for approval by the government, strictly following all necessary steps for inter-ministerial and public consultations as set out by the Rules of Procedure of the government.

How much time would it take to apply this?

The tool has been designed in a simple manner and should not take more than three weeks for the re-prioritisation itself. However, the finalisation of the elaboration of the updated planning document depends on how fast the PAR co-ordination body/unit can prepare the draft document. This envisages an active role performed by the institution/unit in charge of the overall PAR co-ordination and the participation of other bodies involved in the PAR process in the country.

Where would it lead?

If applied correctly, the tool would help the administration to identify the most important and relevant reform measures that would need to be prioritised both in terms of internal resource allocation as well as the timing of the implementation, so that better results and stronger impact of reforms are secured as early as possible. The process can lead to a limited number of PAR-related objectives and actions that would be focused only on the key reforms which would improve the capacity of the public administration to deal with the aftermath of the crisis in a more effective and efficient manner, and to be better prepared for facing a similar crisis in the future.

Annex 1 of the SIGMA tool for the Re-Prioritisation of PAR Strategies and Action Plans

For the ease of filling in the Re-Prioritisation tool, it is advisable to use it as a MS Excel table. Besides indicating [YES/NO] or [1-5 scores] answer for each of the analysed objective/measure/action, it is advisable to ask the respondents to provide further evidence as reference for each of the positive responses: [YES] or [those ranked top in 1-5 scale] response. This would allow to ensure that all answers are evidence-based and that the lead of the PAR institution can provide informative explanations to the political level decision makers.

No.	Objective / measure / actions	Set of criteria related to COVID-19 crisis (e.g. more weights attached in comparison to the other set of criteria)				Set of criteria related to overall importance for PAR policy			
		Has the implementation of this objective/measure/ action become more important because of COVID-19 crisis? [YES/NO] or alternatively [1…5]	Has a similar temporary measure been introduced as part of COVID-19 response in some institutions? [YES/NO] or alternatively [1…5]	Is this PAR-related objective/measure/action relevant for COVID-19 crisis response stipulated by Government? [YES/NO] or alternatively [1…5]	Has institution responsible for leading this work demonstrated ability to implement reforms during COVID-19 crisis? [YES/NO] or alternatively [1…5]	Is this issue important for the society in general and non-state actors as part of building a more responsive and resilient public administration? [YES/NO] or alternatively [1…5]	Is this issue among the priorities set out by the Government's Programme in the area of PAR? [YES/NO] or alternatively [1…5]	Is funding still available and confirmed (100%) for the implementation of the objective/measure /action? [YES/NO] or alternatively [1…5]	Is this issue clearly linked with fulfilment of international obligations of the country (i.e. European integration process)? [YES/NO] or alternatively [1…5]
1.	… [text is inserted here] …								
2.	… [text is inserted here] …								
N.	… [text is inserted here] …								